

## Congressman Spencer Bachus Ranking Member, House Financial Services Committee Opening Statement at the Hearing on “Federal Housing Response to Hurricane Katrina”

February 6, 2007

Let me begin by thanking Chairman Frank for scheduling this hearing, and congratulating him as he assumes the chairmanship of this important committee. In keeping with the tradition of bipartisanship long associated with the Financial Services Committee, we have developed a positive working relationship. I look forward to building upon that relationship in the months ahead.

Let me also welcome Deputy Secretary Roy A. Bernardi as well as the members of Congress and other witnesses who will be appearing in front of the Committee today. I understand four panels will be presenting to us, and I’d like to thank these witnesses for their willingness to step forward and share their experiences and insights.

We are all aware of the tremendous costs wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Most of us recall the stark images broadcast by the news media during that last week of August 2005 — images of suffering and devastation; of neighborhoods, communities, dreams, futures, and, yes, human lives swept away in moments; of a great American city, New Orleans, reduced to near primitive conditions.

Along the Mississippi coast, century-old homes that had withstood storm after storm were lost forever.

As frightening as it was for those of us who viewed Katrina’s wrath from a distance via television and other news reports, only those who experienced it firsthand can truly appreciate the devastation and anguish left in Katrina’s wake. While many did not live to tell their stories, some did, and they are here with us today.

After the storm passed, we learned that:

- Katrina devastated an area of 90,000 square miles.[Source: Powell Report]
- Katrina left 770,000 people homeless [Source: CRS citing Louisiana Remembrance & Rebirth publication, “Hurricane Katrina Anniversary Data for Louisiana”].
- Katrina had a death toll of 1,464 in Louisiana alone. [Source: CRS]
- In Louisiana, an estimated 645,000 people were displaced. In Mississippi, an estimated 66,000 people were displaced [Source: CRS].

From a personal standpoint, I'm particularly interested to hear the stories of those wrestling with the storm's difficult and frustrating aftermath, and to learn how effective billions of dollars in Federal aid have been in supporting relief, recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Further, I hope we will also reach consensus on some of the critical questions facing Congress relative to this nation's disaster response, such as determining which federal agency should lead the national response, and developing a strategy for dealing with uninsured losses. Once the appropriate agency is designated, it is of utmost importance to determine its role and primacy in supporting state and local efforts.

Katrina not only left physical devastation in its wake, it left behind a reservoir of anger, strong emotions, and painful experiences. Our challenge is to channel these experiences and emotions into an appropriate response. We must not let witnesses' rightful anguish inspire us only to legislative anger. The people addressing us today, as well as thousands of affected Americans, depend upon us — Republicans and Democrats alike — not to get angry, but to get it right. So do those families who, in the future, may themselves experience a Katrina-like tragedy.

In the past few years, we have viewed the Middle East and events there, and have hoped people would set aside age-old hostilities and grievances, come together, and build a new society founded on cooperation and brotherhood. We face a similar challenge in this country. The natural inclination is to criticize and denigrate the Katrina relief efforts, but what is needed is altogether different, and that is an honest commitment to come together and avoid mistakes of the past.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, it is imperative that we not waste our energy in concentrating on past mistakes, but rather focus on ways to avoid them in the future.

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